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ABSTRACT

For the student of American politics as well as for the student of Brazilian literature and culture, a close reading of a 70-year old Brazilian science fiction novel could provide some insights into the ongoing presidential campaign in the United States. In 1925, one of Brazil's most popular writers, Jose Bento Monteiro Lobato, wrote a novel called "O Presidente Negro" ("The Negro President"). The scenario involved a Black candidate who was running for President of the United States, although it was set far in the future in the year 2228. The central conceit around the story is that there is a 3-way race for President of the United States with the president running for re-election against a female candidate from the "Feminist Party" and a brilliant, cultivated Black man running as an independent candidate. The novel is elaborated as a story-within-a-story. The protagonist, Ayrton, has a car accident in the Brazilian countryside and is rescued by a mysterious inventor-philosopher who takes him back to his singular residence, a sort of castle in a utopian setting, where Ayrton is nursed back to health by the inventor's daughter. She shows Ayrton an invention of her father's which sees into the future--in this case, the United States election. The parallels between the possible candidacy of Colin Powell and the situation in the novel are intriguing. And for Americans, the way the country is seen by other cultures is always eye-opening. (Includes 13 notes.) (NKA)

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Prescient Science Fiction: Monteiro Lobato's "O Presidente Negro" after 70 Years

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At the exact moment that this paper is being researched and written, Colin Powell's autobiography, after only one week of publication, is a runaway success--number 1 on the "New York Times" Best Seller List and the fastest selling book that Random House has ever published. By the time this conference convenes in February 1996, perhaps General Powell will have decided whether to run for President of the United States, or perhaps he will still be debating the pros and cons of a candidacy--should he run as a Republican, a Democrat, or an Independent; will his stature as an authentic leader carry more weight with voters than his being a black man? Or will 1996 bring as-yet-unknown problems or complications that will change the electoral equation?

In Brazil in 1925, Jose Bento Monteiro Lobato had already imagined a scenario in which a black candidate was running for President of the United States, although he set it far in the future, in the year 2228. Initially, Monteiro Lobato wrote a serial science fiction story called "O Choque das Racas" for a popular newspaper. The next year it was published as a novel and retitled, "O Presidente Negro." The central conceit around which the story is constructed is that in the year 2228, there is a three-way election for President of the United States, with a president running for reelection against a beautiful woman

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candidate from the "Feminist Party" and a handsome, intelligent, well-educated black man who is running as an independent candidate. With the substitution of a conservative Republican candidate for the feminist candidate in the novel, we could have our current real life political scenario.

According to one scholar, "O Presidente Negro" was written very quickly, when Monteiro Lobato was preparing to take up a post as commercial attache at the Brazilian Consulate in New York City. Lobato wanted very much to publish the book in the U.S. and felt that there was a good possibility of this happening.(1) In Lobato's own words in a letter to one of his close friends: "A publicacao do 'Choque' nos Estados Unidos vai dar-me um saco do dolares. Em marco ja estara o negocio em andamento."(2) In another letter to another good friend written at Christmas of 1926, just before he leaves for the U.S., he continues in the same vein: "Minhas esperancas estao todas na America. Mas o 'Choque' so em fins de janeiro estara traduzido para o ingles, de modo que so la pelo segundo semestre verei dolares. Mas os verei e a beca, ja nao resta a menor duvida." He goes on to talk about his money troubles (a continuing theme in his life), and ends the letter with "O 'Choque' ja saiu em Sao Paulo, mas ainda nao o vi. Esse livro vai mudar o rumo da minha vida. O consulado americano esta interessadissimo nele..."(3)

We hear no more of "O Presidente Negro" in Monteiro Lobato's letters until October of 1927, when he writes (in a semi-humorous vein) from New York to his friend Gastao Cruls:

> ...Tudo depende da saida do meu 'Choque,' e do escandalo que ele causar. Um escandalo literario equivale no minimo a

> $2,000,000 dolares para o autor e com essa dose de fertilizante nao ha Tupy que nao grele. Esse ovo de escandalo foi recusado por cinco editores conservadores e amigos de obras bem comportadas, mas acaba de encher de entusiasmo um editor que quer que eu o refaca e ponha mais materia de exasperacao...Ele acha que com isto ate uma proibicao policial obteremos--o que vale um milhao de dolares. Um livro proibido aqui sai na Inglaterra e entra 'bootlegued' com o 'whisky' e outras implicancias dos puritanos.(4)

This glimpse of modern marketing strategy is the last that the reader of Lobato's "Cartas Escolhidas" ever hears of "O Presidente Negro" in the United States. The author mentions the "conservative editors" but indeed, the novel paints a bleak picture of a racist American society, and Lobato was probably overly optimistic to think that his work would be welcome in the United States--even in the guise of science fiction.

Despite his portryal of a racist America, Lobato was an unabashed admirer of the United States, and he enjoyed his years here very much. His letters are filled with praise for the modern society, the briliance of Henry Ford, and the vibrance of New York. He turns, however, many times in these letters to the subject of "the puritans and puritanism," returning to it again in his book, "America," which he wrote upon his return to Brazil in 1931 and which chronicles his time spent in the U.S. His thoughts about puritanism meld with his reservations about American women and appear to be best summed up by the following words of "Mr. Slang," the fictitious character with whom he maintains a dialogue in "America":

> A America e isso--o perpetuo conflito entre o fanatismo que desembarcou em New England com os puritanos e a natureza humana como ela e. Desse conflito nascem todas a suas

> tragedias. Um nega, outra afirma. A 'girl' americana, toda natureza, saude e impetos, afirma. A matrona que dela sai...nega. Mas como a 'girl', no seu periodo de floracao, nao se associa, nao se organiza para 'fins sociais,' so preocupada com a coisa linda que e viver a linda vida de flor, quem vem a predominar e a matrona... E como quem governa sao elas, porque governam os homens sejam Hayes ou nao, a America assume este tom de matercracia em 'mass production,' que tanto irrita Clarence Darrow, Mencken, e outros sublimes revoltados.(5)

The plot of "O Presidente Negro" is that of a story-within-a-story. It contains a familiar background element nearly always present in Monteiro Lobato's fiction--a utopian setting.(6) The young protagonist, Ayrton, who is employed by a commercial firm in Sao Paulo to collect money owed the firm, has an auto accident in the country and is rescued by Professor Benson, an inventor-philosopher who takes him to his singular residence, a sort of castle removed from noise and confusion and surrounded by foliage and vistas which invoke peace and harmony. The professor has a beautiful, blond, blue-eyed daughter, Miss Jane, who is his only companion besides the castle's servants. Jane has been educated by her father and has participated in all his experiments. She helps nurse Ayrton back to health, and naturally he falls in love with her. One of Professor Benson's inventions is a "porviroscopio," a device which allows him to see into the future. The elderly professor dies after destroying the instrument, and Jane begins to tell Ayrton all the changes that she has seen in the social milieus of the future--the "mongolization" of Europe (in the book this means that the influx of asiatic peoples has changed the makeup of Europe), the triumph of eugenics, and the furor of the United States election in 2228.

When Jane and Ayrton discuss the consequences of immigration in Europe, they also compare the experiences of Brazil and the United States in how each country has addressed the presence of a substantial black population. Jane, descendant of Anglo-Saxons, speaks in favor of the American approach to the racial question, while Ayrton argues that the Brazilians are more pragmatic in questions of race. At one point he says: "A nossa solucao foi admiravel. Dentro de cem ou duzentos anos tera desaprecido por completo o nosso negro em virtude de cruzamentos successivos com o branco. Nao acha que fomos felicissimos na nossa solucao?" (7) Jane politely and sweetly differs with him and, speaking in favor of the separation of the races, says: "Carater racial e uma cristalizacao que as lentas se vai operando atraves dos seculos. O cruzamento perturba essa cristalizacao, liquefa-la, torna-a instavel. A nossa solucao [brasileira] deu mau resultado." (8)

In essence, Ayrton represents the common Brazilian view of race relations, while Jane represents the common American view--at least the views that were the currency of 1925. Remember, that although this was before the rise of Hitler and his ilk, dubious views such as Jane espouses were already in vogue and even masquerading as science.

A subplot deals with the moral character of the three presidential candidates, especially with the nature of the feminist candidate, Evelyn Astor, beautiful and brainy (thanks to the selective breeding practices of eugenics), but a mouthpiece for the leader of the Feminist Party, Miss Elvin, a sociologist,

who has her own crackpot, psuedo-scientific theories for the split between masculine and feminine voters. Today she would probably be a supporter of the popular psychology in John Gray's book "Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus."

Does "O Presidente Negro" fit within the confines of the genre of science fiction? In one of the few sustained critiques of this novel that I could find (and it dates from 30 years ago), the author's opinion was that "There are no real characters in this book."(9) This is certainly true, but characterization has never been a strong suit of science fiction, and in this respect, I think that Lobato is well within the rules of the genre. For me, a weakness of this particular story-within-a-story plot is that Jane only recounts what she has seen in the future--the reader visits 2228 only briefly. So that, for all its other science fiction qualities, it is a very static story--and an exciting plot is usually an important element in science fiction. Perhaps this flaw is due to the novel's initial appearance in episodic form in the newspaper. The plot device of someone telling a story to another person can work very well in episodes which appear successively. But another mark of a good science fiction novel is the creation of a believable environment of another world, complete with its own culture and speaking style. Witness the numerous versions of "Star Trek" that populate TV--unless you a regular watcher and part of the "Star Trek" discourse community, it is possible to watch an episode for five minutes or more without understanding anything the characters are

saying. The jargon is like a separate language, and the casual watcher needs a translator to understand what is going on.

In "O Presidente Negro" the reader never really leaves the utopian castle (except briefly), and the story is experienced through Ayrton and Jane. The book is certainly modeled on H.G. Wells's "Time Machine," but according to Timothy Brown, "The novel is a showcase for Lobato. It has something of everything, with most of the characteristics of his writing: satire, humor, imagination, and ideas...even a description of the Brazilian forest."(10) And I would add that it has his natural, conversational style and plain but vivid language, not the stylized discourse of typical science fiction. During his long writing career, however, Monteiro Lobato always "fought to take out of his writing everything that smacked of a literary language."(11) He was traditional, and even conservative, in some of his social beliefs and opinions, but he never sacrificed his artistic principles as to the plain writing style that he believed in--in opposition to the academic (as in "Academia Brasileira") style prevalent in Brazilian letters.

The novel has a classic happy ending--Jane recognizes Ayrton's love for her and returns his affection. As for the story-within-a-story--Brown feels that "...had Lobato decided what type of book he really wanted to write, he might have produced a good humorous novel...but he yields to the temptation of a grotesquely tragic ending."(12) In the novel's denoument, Jim Roy, the black candidate, wins the election, but the feminist

candidate and the president put aside their differences to unite in opposition to Jim, so that, through their machinations, he apparently dies in his sleep (in reality, he is murdered) before he can be sworn in. The rest of the black population is sterilized without even knowing it, through common products of everyday use.

Rather than "grotesquely tragic" the ending is deeply pessimistic. The humorous aspects have faded with the change in attitudes over the years, and today the author's imagination does seem more like prescience. In these days of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, mass tribal murders in Rwanda, militia groups who are stuck in the myths of another century, American presidential candidates who want to build fences to keep out Mexicans, abolish any kind of affirmative action, deny aid to teenaged mothers (you can just hear these candidates saying to themselves, "Hey, if they're under 18 they can't vote anyway, so what difference does it make!"), and relax even nominal environmental restrictions which protect our already none-too-clean water and air, Monteiro Lobato's scenario in "O Presidente Negro" does not seem that grotesque or far-fetched.

The last word on whether or not this novel is science fiction or realistic fiction shall remain with the author. On his return from the United States in 1931, Monteiro Lobato said: "I don't have to change anything in 'O Presidente Negro'. The America that I portrayed in my book is absolutely the same America that I found there."(13)

Epilogue

Several months have now passed since General Colin Powell declined to be a candidate for President of the United States. Bob Dole looks as though he will be the Republican candidate for President, and the columnist Clarence Page writes in the Chicago Tribune of March 17, 1996: "'Powellmania' is back...I am more astounded by our refusal to let go of the general than his reluctance to throw his helmet into the ring." Page continues: "I would like to see Powell run [as Bob Dole's Vice-President] because I think he would be a terrific unifier of the races at a time when our national politics have grown dangerously divisive."

For the student of American politics as well as for the student of Brazilian literature and culture, however, a close reading of Monteiro Lobato's prescient novel limns a situation that makes the reader draw back from the idea of a Black man as a candidate for high office in the United States.

Notes

1. Timothy Brown, Jr., Luso-Brazilian Review, II(1), June 1965, p. 99.

2. Monteiro Lobato, Cartas Escolhidas, vol. 1 (São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1959), p. 189.

3. Ibid., p. 200.

4. Ibid., p. 218.

5. Monteiro Lobato, America (São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1962), p. 144.

6. Nola Kortner Aiex, "A Brazilian Oz?" Paper presented at the Popular Culture Association Meetings 1985. [ED 291 098]

7. Monteiro Lobato, O Presidente Negro ou O Choque das Racas: Romance Americano do Ano 2228 (São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1964), p. 206.

8. Ibid.

9. Brown, p. 101.

10. Ibid., p. 104.

11. Marisa Lajolo, Monteiro Lobato (São Paulo: Abril Educação, 1981), p. 102.

12. Brown, p. 104.

13. Monteiro Lobato, O Presidente Negro (ed. note), viii.

Abstract

Prescient Science Fiction: Monteiro Lobato's "O Presidente Negro" after 70 Years

In 1925 in Brazil, one of the country's most popular fiction writers, Jose Bento Monteiro Lobato, wrote a novel called "O Presidente Negro" ("The Negro Presidente"). Monteiro Lobato imagined a scenario in which a black candidate was running for President of the United States, although he set it far in the future, in the year 2228. Initially, Monteiro Lobato wrote the piece as a serial science fiction-fantasy story for a popular newspaper. The central conceit around which the story is constructed is that in 2228 there is a 3-way election for President of the U.S., with the president running for re-election against a female candidate from the "Feminist Party" and a brilliant, well-educated black man running as an independent candidate. The novel is elaborated as a story-within-a-story. The protagonist, Ayrton, has an auto accident in the country and is rescued by a cultured but somewhat mysterious inventor-philosopher who takes him back to his singular residence, a sort of castle in a utopian setting, where Ayrton is nursed back to health by the professor's daughter. She introduces Ayrton to her father's invention which sees into the future, and America in 2228 is what they see in the invention. The paper discusses the novel, the author's unsuccessful efforts to have the novel translated and published in America (he was the Brazilian commercial attache in New York from 1927-1931), and the parallels between the situations in the novel and the real-life politics of the almost-candidacy of Colin Powell for President of the United States.

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